
Gallery Notes

Morag Fraser

IN 1868 HENRY JAMES paid a visit to 'Mr. Wm. Morris, Poet' in Queen Square. It was, he told his sister, the 'crowning day' of his visit to London. Mrs Morris (who was afflicted with toothache throughout the visit) he describes as 'an apparition of fearful and wonderful intensity'. There is, as Morris's sparkling biographer, Fiona McCarthy, remarks, 'a very transatlantic sense of marvel' in James's description. There is also a Jamesian intuitiveness. About Jane Morris, née Burden, muse (and lover?) to Dante Gabriel Rossetti as well as Morris, he is astute: 'It's hard to say whether she's a grand synthesis of all the pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made — or they a "keen analysis" of her — whether she's an original or a copy.' But about William Morris, James has no reservation. He is an original, 'an extraordinary example, in short, of a delicate sensitive genius and taste, saved by a perfectly healthy body and temper. All his designs are quite as good (or rather nearly so) as his poetry.'

Christopher Menz, who has now curated and written the catalogues for two splendid Morris exhibitions for the Art Gallery of South Australia, concerns himself more with Morris's designs than his poetry. But the characteristic virtue of Menz's enterprise has been to set his readers and exhibition viewers off on a quest for this squat Victorian giant of a man, this 'hedgehog with nastiness', as he described himself in the year of Henry James's visit.

And what a grand prodigy he is. Menz, who possesses the tact and scholarship of a curator, not the flourish of a biographer, makes no fabulous claims for Morris. Morris's greatest skill as a designer, he notes, was his ability to create repeating patterns. Faint praise? No, because via the new catalogue and exhibition, *Morris & Co.* (which follow *Morris & Company: Pre-Raphaelites and the Arts and Crafts Movement in South Australia*, 1994), Menz also documents the man's extraordinary range, industry and energy — the socialist reformer as well as the meticulous draftsman-designer, the father, husband, lecturer, industrial innovator, champion of women, craft and craftspeople, and tireless poet ('if a chap can't compose an epic while he's weaving tapestry he had better shut up'). That perfectly healthy body that James remarked was to be worn out by maniacal labour. Morris's fatal illness, his physician claimed, was 'simply being William Morris, and having done more work than most ten men'.

Morris — English and diffident (Rossetti, brilliant and unkind, drew him as a fat wombat) — nonetheless had the measure of his own ambition. In the industrial England of 1861, minor arts (decorating, furnishing, printing etc.) were, Morris declared, in a state of 'complete degradation', so 'with the conceited courage of a young man I set myself to reforming all that'. And reform all that he did, in a style that drew intelligently from, and in some cases gave back to, the great decorative traditions of Egypt, Persia and India. (By the early twentieth century, Menz notes, Morris's firm was supplying dyed silks, wools and linen thread to India, thus assisting the revival of that country's embroidery industry.) What Morris worked into his repeating patterns — wallpapers, fabrics, carpets, tapestries, tiles, stained glass, typefaces and calligraphy — was an England that he understood with the keen, retentive eye of a child and the skill of a master craftsman who knew not just how but *why* one might make things of utility and beauty.

William Morris was the high bourgeois son of a high bourgeois London businessman ('a boor and son of a boor'), so his life, unsurprisingly, was one of continuities and discontinuities. He belonged firmly to the art circles of his time. He subsidised his often impecunious Oxford friends. He maintained, after his marriage to Jane Burden ('wrong' class — his parents were not consulted and did not approve), large houses for his family and friends, but did not always manage to live in them himself — or not often. He bore his wife's illnesses and liaisons (with Rossetti and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt) and consoled his friends in their own. One astute friend, Luke Ionides, judged that Morris was a strong man with the consoling feelings of a tender woman: 'I always compared him with a sea-breeze, which seemed to blow away all one's black vapours.'

Morris trained as an architect (briefly), wrote novels and poetry, built houses and businesses, and researched old crafts (his dyeing and discharge printing techniques, with their consequent intensity of colour, are a story in themselves — and Menz tells it). He set up the Kelmscott Press, and took passionately to socialist politics. He also drew out in many others, notably his daughter May and the designer J.H. Dearle, the enthusiasm — and the skills — that were so abundant in himself. No wonder Menz should work so assiduously on Morris, this sea breeze who

could blow away black vapours. He is so compulsively likeable! And the sheer industry of the man is tempting for a scholar: Menz has made new discoveries about Morris & Co. in California's Huntington archive.

But there is a further spur. The Art Gallery of South Australia, through bourgeois coincidence one could say, now has the largest collection of Morris & Co. furnishings outside Britain. The 'immensely wealthy' Adelaide Barr Smith family took to Morris & Co. with such loyalty and prodigality of investment that their many houses became Morris museums in miniature. What remains of that great variety and wealth of material is now there for the curating and exhibiting. It was not gifted to the Gallery as the various Barr Smith houses were being sold, demolished or passed on, but Adelaide is a close-knit town and, under Menz's 'gentle persuasion' (AGSA director Ron Radford's phrase), much has recently been gifted to the gallery to augment its existing Morris collection. Adelaide already owned the famous Burne-Jones *Adoration of the Magi* tapestry and much else besides. Additional pieces have been loaned for this exhibition. The result is sufficient representative work to give any visitor a comprehensive feel for Morris and for Morris & Co. And because of the intimacy of the Adelaide connection, this is no antiquarian exhibition. It is full of life and the mark of days energetically spent — wear on the chairs, fading in the folds of curtains, fragments of wallpaper from houses now gone, the dye and sample books of Morris himself.

Much of the material exhibited, the embroideries in particular, was completed in Adelaide (Menz's documentation is full and fascinating). The Barr Smith women stitched Morris's designs and those of May and Dearle. The handwork is extraordinary — what were they thinking as they sewed? From those screens and hangings and cushions and table covers you catch a whiff of complex lives. Joanna Barr Smith, Menz records, gave birth to thirteen children, six of whom died in infancy. She decorated her houses extravagantly; so did her husband. Some of their daughters became skilled craftswomen. Why?

In all the work exhibited, there is an architectural logic and an unfailing connection with the natural world — of plants, birds, animals. It is an English world — what else should one expect from Morris? Fiona McCarthy (in *William Morris: A Life for Our Times*, 1995) says of him that he had a 'sense of place so acute as to be almost a disability'. But in the contextual Australian works in the Adelaide collection, in the Arts and Crafts pieces, the pre-Raphaelite paintings and design, one can see that tradition continuing and mutating in a land that has different natural forms to dictate the rhythms of design. For us, and for those Australian artists who had both the eyes, and the nerve, to absorb a tradition and reinvent it, that is William Morris's priceless legacy.

Morris & Co. exhibition dates: 21 November 2002–26 March 2003, Art Gallery of South Australia
Christopher Menz, *Morris & Co.*, Art Gallery of South Australia, \$79.95hb, 188pp, 0 7308 3029 2